Rich Diversity from Microtones

11/07/2014 by Stan

United States **American Festival of Microtonal Music:** Soloists, Johnny Reinhard (director, composer, bassoon), Spectrum, New York City. 12-15.4.2014 (AR)

Musicians:
Johnny Reinhard, bassoon and festival director
Vito Ricci, percussion, “wrench guitar”
Joshua Levinson, trumpet
Joshua Morris, double bass
Skip La Plante, homemade instruments
Cristian Amigo, guitar
Angelos Quetzalcoatl, guitars
Richard Carr, violin
Anastasia Solberg, viola
Michael Hafftka, fretless guitar
Yonat Hafftka, theremin
Jacob Barton, udderbot
Shaahin Mohajeri, tombak
Jeroen Paul Thesseling, electric bass guitar

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New York-based composer and bassoonist Johnny Reinhard, a long-time champion of microtonal music and alternate tunings, has directed the American Festival of Microtonal Music since 1981. This year, the bohemian, Lower East Side loft-gallery called Spectrum made an informal, artistic setting for the festival, very much in tune with its spirit and the diverse programs. Repertoire ranged from first 20th-century composers from different countries who turned to microtonality for the first time (e.g., Alois Haba, Ivan Wyschnegradsky, Julian Carrillo, Harry Partch, Mordecai Sandberg) all the way to present-day composers writing in non-standard tunings and temperaments. There was also early music (e.g., Bach, Handel) performed in historical temperaments, and ethnic music of various countries, as well as jazz and rock.

Reinhard is a virtuosic bassoon player and improviser. Since 2000, he has released microtonal CDs, each focused on a particular style or genre. His improvisations possess virtuosity, expressivity, and character and frequently a certain formal coherence, as if they were previously composed; his work with other musicians shares this sense of formal completeness. Many of the works used an unusual scale of 128 notes per octave, a tuning recently discovered by Reinhard, on which he has enthusiastically elaborated.

The April 12 concert consisted almost entirely of interviews with microtonal composers, plus a series of improvisations. A joint improvisation titled *House Band Introduction Music*—performed by Vito Ricci on drums and "wrench" guitar, Joshua Levinson on trumpet and Joshua Morris on double bass—featured free jazz enhanced by microtonal tunings and modernist aesthetics. In his interview, Skip La Plante described the instruments he built himself, one of which is a harp for works by the famous Mexican composer Julian Carrillo.

Mexican guitarist Angelos Quetzalcoatl explained the 13-sound system discovered by Carrillo in 1895, his experimentation with this temperament in his compositions, then performed his improvisation for solo guitar—highly impulsive, emotionally charged and at the same time texturally imaginative and experimental.

Richard Carr expressed his attitude towards his application of the 128-note tuning in an intuitive, rather than a scientific way, and mentioned how this scale changed his perception of music. There was a peculiar presentation of the recently released CDs *True* and *Imagine: Quartets in 128*, featuring Mr. Carr (violin), Mr. Reinhard, Michael Hafftka (fretless guitar), Mr. Quetzalcoatl (guitars), Joshua Morris (double bass) and Yonat Hafftka (theremin), mostly improvisational, the music was slow at the beginning, before

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In his interview Cristian Amigo told about his recent turn to microtonality, inspired by his knowledge of the guitar, his involvement with the jazz and blues styles and his interest in Asian ethnic music. In his view, the 128 tuning has exceptional harmonic and acoustic qualities. The subsequent improvisation, *Bassoon and Guitar Quartet*, with Reinhard and four guitarists, was mysterious, the guitar ensemble ranging from standard strumming to radical percussive effects.

Svjetlana Bukvich, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, discussed how folk music from the countries of the former Yugoslavia influenced her aesthetics. The concert finished off with a relatively short and spirited final improvisation, *House Band Close*, with all the night's musicians, with Reinhard's bassoon taking the lead with a sound slightly resembling a jazz trumpet.

The April 13 concert began with Reinhard's impressive new string quartet, *Seventh Heaven*, written during his trip to China—a reserved, philosophical and subtly expressive work, alluding to Chinese folk music. Most intriguing was its harmonic language, ranging from diatonic to chromatic, yet preserving the sense of continuous consonance. Harry Partch's aphoristic *Lyrics by Li Po*, written to the texts of the great Chinese poet, were intoned by Reinhard and played by violist Anastasia Solberg. These four short songs were eclectically expressive, unusually distinctive in their textural approach, with a few short outbursts of dramatic motion.

Most impressive was *Lied und Gebilde* ("Song and Image") for viola and vibraphone by one of the leading Armenian composers, Tigran Mansurian, again with Ms. Solberg, and Chris Earley on vibraphone and gong. Introverted and expressive, it gravitates harmonically towards diatonic minor. Its three movements made use of melodies derived from historical Armenian church chants, spelling them out with microtonal tunings and temperaments. Sparsely textured, the main weight fell on the solo viola, with the percussion instruments adding delicate accompaniment. Julian Carrillo's *Prelude Impromptu*, dramatically played by Quetzalcoatl, was a lyrical guitar piece, which combined a partially diatonic harmonic center with alternative tuning.

Next came the exotic *Bassotom* by Iranian Shaahin Mohajeri, combining live performance by Reinhard on bassoon with a pre-recorded performance by the composer on the *tombak*. A colorful, spirited demonstration of the instruments' virtuosity, the composition combined an ethnic foundation with the domain of Western avant-garde influences.

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transparent sound world gained momentum, acquiring isolated features of jazz and pop in the middle, and after reaching a point of repose, subsiding. After a slight false ending, the music started again, this time with a slow, lyrical character, a greater degree of instrumental subtlety, and a few allusions to ethnic music.

The third concert on April 14 happened to be Passover, so Reinhard opened with a speech on the occasion. Amigo's *Blues Image* (for amplified guitar) had a strong blues flavor, albeit very improvisatory and with non-standard tuning. Reinhard performed his own *Oak,* along with Hafftka on guitar and Jeroen Paul Thesseling on electric bass guitar. The piece began with the three performers saying the word "oak," and then proceeded on in the 128 note tuning with music of proportionate duration with a steady tempo, featuring a sturdy melodic bassoon line, accompanied by ostinato lines for the two guitars. On quartertone guitar, Quetzalcoatl performed his brief *Tribute to Van Halen*, juxtaposing flamenco and other traditional styles with modernist gestures and microtones.

Jacob Barton performed *Hoprock* on a homemade instrument, the *udderbot*, with sounds reminiscent of woodwind instruments or those made by blowing into a bottle or seashell. An assortment of sounds was interspersed with short phrases spoken by the composer—including an impressive sequence when Barton sang and played simultaneously. Then he and Amigo performed an extravagant duo improvisation. In addition to the unusual *udderbot*, Amigo's electric guitar ranged from harsh and dry percussive effects to pungent reverberations.

Quetzalcoatl performed *Dyzn* by Mexican composer Eduardo Caballero on a specially amplified guitar, making a range of sounds far beyond what a standard instrument can do. This was followed by an improvisation by both of the Hafftka's and Reinhard titled *Homage to Passover*. After a decidedly religious mood, greater dynamism appears towards the end, when all three instruments evoked religious incantations with a slight surrealistic touch.

The concert finished with another improvisation titled *Tutti*—more diverse in its instrumental sonorities and more contrasting in its changes. Beginning with a meditative mood, the music quickly gained momentum and became much more rhythmically pronounced and dynamically active, all the instruments blending well together. Subsequent passages were alternately slow and contemplative or fast and boisterous.

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advocated by American music theorist Joseph Yasser in the early 20th century. Hence, the concert was labeled “The Yasser Collection – the 19-Tone Trumpet.”

Upwards in Time by Elia Koussa was impulsive, very disjunctive and varied in its development, though still preserving an organic dynamic integrity. *Shared Frequencies: 2, 3, 5 / 1, 6, 11, 20* by Ephraim Wenger for trumpet and electronics was quite impressive, featuring slow tones for trumpet, with electronics delicately layering above, creating a profoundly contemplative result. Later the electronics changed from pitched tones to abstract sounds resembling water and background noise, with the trumpet in grotesque flutter tonguing. *Yiiiiiiiiiiha* by German composer Gordon Kempe was short and fast, with non-standard experimental sounds for the trumpet, including gurgling, screaming and whistling. The piece was written especially for Altoft for his American trip, hence the exclamatory title and the sounds. Eleri Pound’s quiet *Gnossienne* was quiet, consisting of slow and lengthy notes—at first separate and isolated with unvarying pitch, eventually turning into melodic fragments towards the end.

Donald Bousted’s *Yasser Describes His Polemic (and adds some footnotes)* waswritten in a 19-tone scale as a tribute to Joseph Yasser, the Russian-born organist and musicologist. Using loud sounds with large interval leaps, Bousted frequently reached the trumpet’s pungent high range. Slow rhythmic sections alternated with fragments with fast, dynamic ones, also connoting separate notes divided by large intervals. *Still Life* for trumpet and electronics by Oded Ben-Tal was based on quartertones, rather than the 19-tone scale. Its moderate tempo and energy organically combined lively trumpet passages with an array of electronic sounds.

Altoft finished by playing his own composition *Rasp* for trumpet and rotary valve. It was possibly the most experimental of the night, beginning with whispering sounds and continuing with one note performed continuously with changing overtones, multiphonics and special sound effects, like flutter tonguing. The final melodic gesture was in radical contrast to everything that happened before.

All in all, the American Festival of Microtonal Music presented a motley few nights. Johnny Reinhard has demonstrated once again that he remains a true champion of this unique and imaginative trend in contemporary music. He has created a congenial setting for music that is unfortunately quite seldom heard in concert halls, and has brought together an assortment of unique, talented musicians from all over the world.

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